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SANCHEZ'S DEPARTURE FROM IRAQ 'BUSINESS AS USUAL,' KIMMITT SAYS

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WASHINGTON – The upcoming departure of V Corps' Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez from Iraq was planned long ago, and has nothing to do with the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, a senior U.S. military spokesman noted May 25.

"We have always expected General Sanchez to depart (Iraq) sometime after (the) transfer of sovereignty," Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, deputy operations director for Multinational Force-Iraq, explained to reporters at a Baghdad news conference.

News reports that speculate Sanchez is leaving Iraq prematurely due to the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse investigations "have got the story wrong," Kimmitt said. Combat commanders in Iraq, he explained, typically serve in theater for a year before rotation. Sanchez has been in Iraq since April 2003, Kimmitt pointed out.

During a meeting with a group of Iraqis in the Oval Office the same day as Kimmitt's remarks, President George W. Bush responded to questions about Sanchez's departure from Iraq by praising the general's service in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"Rick Sanchez has done a fabulous job. He's been there for a long time. His service has been exemplary," the president said.

Kimmitt said he'd seen no official Army confirmation of Sanchez's departure date from Iraq, but added that news reports announcing Sanchez's departure around the end of June would not be "inconsistent with the timeline that we've been working on."

